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Engaging employers in the provision of work-related learning

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Introduction

The Aiming University Learning @ Work (AUL@W) Project was a partnership project between the University of Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of St Andrews. Funded by a Strategic Change Grant from the Scottish Funding Council, the project's overarching aim was to enhance the long-term employability of undergraduates on non-vocational courses through the provision of work-related learning (WRL). This article describes some of the ways in which, over the course of three years, the project team established and maintained collaborative relationships with a cross-sectoral range of employers whose willing participation made that provision possible.

There were three phases to the project, in the first of which a feasibility study was conducted to provide the evidence base for the second (implementation and best practice) and third (establishing models for sustainability) phases. The first six pilot subject areas were also established in the first phase of the project, with four more added in the second:

- Business and the Biosciences
- Business and Management
- Law, Business and Social Sciences
- History
- Maths
- Physics (at two of the partner institutions)
- Psychology.

In each case, the project team worked with the academics involved to identify the best ways in which to sustain, or further develop, the WRL already being offered; or the most effective ways to introduce WRL opportunities into courses with no existing provision.

The challenges of engaging employers

The challenge of introducing or developing these new WRL opportunities also brought the challenge of making new contacts and building new relationships with employers. Each of the pilot teams was asked to compile a 'wish list' of the types of employer with whom they would prefer to work and the types of WRL activities they thought would be most suitable for their students. This led to an ongoing process of matching academic departments and potentially suitable employers, including some who had well-established relationships with higher education in general, or with the partner institutions in particular. New contacts were made through networking and sector-specific events or by direct approaches to organisations whose business or interests were compatible with the 'wish lists' provided by the pilot teams. The process of establishing links between employers and academics to develop each new activity or opportunity mirrored the findings of the project's ongoing research, in that many of the perceived barriers to engagement with WRL were based on the misconception that this necessarily referred to 'work placements'. The project devised a typology of WRL – including visits, talks, shadowing, mentoring and projects – which demonstrated a greater variety and broader scope of engagement, with correspondingly wide-ranging levels of input, participation and resources required. This typology, which was a mixture of existing models of WRL and some new proposals by the team, was of particular interest to employers, resulting in a greater awareness of, and willingness to engage with, WRL.

Successful engagement with employers

This willingness has resulted in some innovative and collaborative approaches to the provision of WRL opportunities, including:

Integrated placements

These were devised to allow students to undertake WRL that is also course-related, promoted to targeted classes and benefiting from the support and endorsement of committed academics. Students from English Language and History were given the opportunity to interview representatives from voluntary organisations with a view to collating oral histories which then became the property of the organisations, but also provided those students with valuable data which they could use in coursework or dissertations. History students also had the opportunity to access the archives of the organisation where they were working and to help transfer these records to a database.

Those participating in these 'integrated placements' appreciated the opportunity to access data and resources that were of direct relevance to their course; to collaborate with the organisations involved; and to see how their academic subject disciplines could be applied and valued in the 'world of work'.

While 'integrated placements' are one example of the new or innovative collaborations that resulted from the matching process, other activities took new approaches to core interactions between universities and employers – such as careers talks or site visits – which were targeted at specific subject disciplines or student groups.

Visits to financial services sectors

These opportunities were organised for History, Maths and Physics students, most of whom would not previously have considered themselves to be equipped for this type of career. The companies taking part made frequent references to the specific skills and attributes with which these particular students would graduate, and how these would be relevant to this type of career. Feedback from students highlighted how much they appreciated this approach and the opportunity to meet potential employers.

Employers Day for Physics

The Employers Day was arranged so that Physics students from the University of St Andrews could not only visit discipline-relevant companies (typically located in the west of Scotland), but could also attend presentations by other such employers. A key feature of the programme was the inclusion of careers which require a Physics degree but are not necessarily laboratory-based. By including speakers from the fields of medical physics and patent law the event opened up new career opportunities and this was an aspect of the day that students seemed particularly to appreciate.

The project has also helped to sustain and extend the existing WRL activities of the pilot teams, particularly by expanding the range of employers involved, for example:

Voluntary Work and Mentoring Scheme

The scheme was originally introduced to allow Psychology students the chance to obtain relevant work experience which would enable them to progress to postgraduate professional qualifications. While some of the participating organisations actively recruit volunteers from the general public, others have only been open to Psychology students specifically because of their specialised subject knowledge. These are organisations whose service users have special learning needs or mental health issues, or are in situations where they need support.

Students participating in the scheme have appreciated the opportunity to help others and to contribute to the aims of the organisation, and the positive benefit to their study and future career.

Evaluation

The evaluations of all the pilot activities and opportunities – feedback from participating students and the academics and employers – have also formed part of the research, which has been ongoing throughout the AUL@W Project. This included a series of cross-sectoral focus groups to gauge employers' perceptions of WRL and their willingness and motivation to engage with it. Those taking part varied in size and nature of business, ranging from the health and law and order services to finance, engineering and computing, and voluntary organisations supporting vulnerable groups in the community. Some were actively involved with WRL, while for others it was a fairly new concept.

The project's combined findings, based on these focus groups and from the pilot evaluations, are that employers:

- are very willing to engage with HE, and with WRL, especially when they are made aware of the range of opportunities available
- from scientific/technical sectors are particularly willing to be involved in curriculum design, to ensure that teaching is in line with latest developments and current skills/knowledge requirements
- strongly believe that, as well as the mutually beneficial learning opportunities, there are other specific benefits for those who engage with WRL, including:
 - benefits for employers: the opportunity of having a piece of work completed under academic supervision, at little or no cost; the enthusiasm and fresh approach of students; up-to-date knowledge; recruitment opportunities
 - benefits for students: 'real life' experience; networking opportunities; awareness of potential career paths; enhanced employability.

Conclusion

Through its combined research and experience with employers the AUL@W Project has been able to identify the barriers to, and facilitating factors for, successful engagement with HE. By working to remove the former, and seeking to increase the latter, the project team has been able to establish good, ongoing relationships with employers, and has found that these relationships are most effective when there are:

- clear communication routes: an initial and ongoing point of contact for employers who approach HEIs, and a counterpart at employer organisations
- clarity from the outset about the expectations and responsibilities students, academics and employers have of each other
- an awareness of, and empathy towards, the pressures and demands in both academia and the world of work.

Many of the participants in the WRL provision offered through the project pilots commented that the opportunity to derive the same benefits that they had from their participation should be more widely and consistently available. If WRL is to be more fully embedded in the curriculum – as recommended in the project outputs, which include guidelines on how

this might be achieved – it requires sustained support from HEIs, both in terms of their internal structures and management, and of their external network of engaged employers. At a time when students are realising that a degree may not in itself be enough to secure graduate employment, effective working relationships between universities and employers can help bridge the gap, identifying the skills and attributes that comprise 'employability' and making it possible for students to develop them.

References

The research publications and outputs of the Aiming University Learning @ Work Project can be found on the project website:

www.glasgow.ac.uk/services/aulw